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THE CRISIS OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

BY H. T. NEWCOMB.

AT the close of the war for the preservation of the Union, the question of the limitation or abolition of slavery, over which there had been sectional and partisan controversy for sixty years, being permanently settled, thoughtful and patriotic citizens saw in fiscal and administrative reforms the greatest opportunity for advancing the public welfare, and as one phase of this movement both of the great parties were impelled to adopt in their national conventions of 1872 strong declarations in favor of reform in the civil service. The Republican platform upon which General Grant was elected the second time favored laws which would "abolish the evils of patronage and make honesty, efficiency, and fidelity the essential qualifications for public position," and at the same time declared that "any system of the civil service under which the subordinate positions of the government are considered rewards for mere party zeal is fatally demoralizing." The joint platform of the Democrats and Liberal Republicans expressed the belief that "honesty, capacity, and fidelity constitute the only valid claim to public employment," and that Federal officers should no longer be selected under a system of "arbitrary favoritism and patronage."

The persistence of the demand for the elimination of partisanship from the selection of minor officials which was thus recognized is shown by the fact that, at every national convention held by the Republican party, the principle of civil service reform which was first enunciated in 1872 has been reiterated with constantly increasing emphasis, and that it was not until 1896, when forces which had been previously subordinate in the Democratic party became ascendant, that the latter ceased to declare its adherence to the merit system and withdrew its endorse-

ment from the civil service law which, sustained by Republican and Democratic Presidents alike, had become, in the minds of many, a settled portion of the national polity. The declaration in regard to the Federal civil service adopted by the Democratic National Convention which met at Chicago during July, 1896, was regarded by many individuals whose opposition to independent, free-coinage of silver at double its commercial valuation by the United States was by no means nominal, as the most unsatisfactory plank in the remarkable platform there adopted. Opposition to tenure during good behavior—for it was necessary so to translate the term “life-tenure” in order to give it any practical meaning—and approval of an extension of the system of fixed terms, which, when applied to minor ministerial offices, has always borne evil fruit, were no doubt correctly construed to mask but imperfectly a general attack upon the system which bases appointment upon established fitness, and continuance and advancement in office upon the degree of ability and fidelity displayed in the service. On the other hand, the declaration adopted by the Republican party in national convention at St. Louis was definitely satisfactory to reformers. It promised thorough and honest enforcement of the law, recognized the existence of opportunities for its extension, and promised that it should be applied whenever practicable. The candidate of the party, whose long public service differentiated him from many, if not most, of his predecessors of both parties, in that his record on no important public question was merely negative, had spoken and voted for the civil service law while a member of the House of Representatives, and again, in his letter accepting the nomination, reiterated in forcible words his adherence to the principles of the merit system. One has only to examine the record of Republican pledges and performance to ascertain, beyond peradventure, that no taint of sympathy with or responsibility for the present unfortunate and untimely attack upon the policy of reform attaches either to President McKinley or to the other real leaders of his party. In fact, in the face of the most persistent solicitation from those who desire a relaxation of the rules which exclude from office the incapable and unfit, the President has, thus early in his term of office, extended the merit system to many places hitherto unprotected from the spoilsmen, and has also established a most wise and beneficent

rule which removes from faithful, capable, and efficient employees the menace of unjust dismissal.

That the repeated and emphatic pledges of the party, and the earnest purpose to sustain and extend the merit system manifested by the President, have not been sufficient to prevent an attack upon that system from sources claimed to be Republican, is not so surprising as it would be were it not perfectly evident that it derives its inspiration and support solely from a small clique of bosses and machine politicians. It is one of the unfortunate incidents of the system of party government, which must, at least temporarily, be borne for the sake of overbalancing benefits, that persons whose relation to any party is invariably selfish and frequently mercenary, and who represent no intelligent or honest constituency, are, nevertheless, too often able, by reason of their experience and skill in political trickery, and their absolute independence of conscientious restraint, sufficiently to dominate local conventions, when no important principles are known to be at stake, to secure the adoption of resolutions of almost any character in relation to subjects not popularly regarded as among the issues of current political controversy. Such persons are opposed to any system which makes fitness a prerequisite of appointment, because it excludes them, together with their most useful adherents, from public office, and makes it impossible to impose upon taxpayers the double burden of maintaining an extravagant and wasteful service, and of supporting the partisan machinery to which such inefficiency and extravagance are due. With this incentive and under these conditions it has been possible to secure during the current year the adoption by a few Republican State conventions, and by the National League of Republican Clubs, of resolutions which appear to represent a desire for the reversal of the policy of the President in regard to civil service reform, but which are easily determined to be merely indicative of a spurious public sentiment, the only real existence of which is in the minds of a few professional politicians. These resolutions exhibit little unity of purpose other than a general disposition to criticise, disingenuously, the existing system, their most striking similarity being that none of them contains an endorsement of the principles of civil service reform, and that they differ from the Republican national platforms of 1884, 1888, 1892, and 1896, that is from

every platform adopted by that party since the inauguration of the reform during the administration of President Arthur, in that they fail to claim for the Republican party the honor and credit of having created and continued the merit system.

The Republicans of Kentucky declared in State convention their opposition to "a system of civil service that builds up an official class of practically life tenure," and demanded "that the civil service be so modified as to limit the terms of service to four years, with the privilege of reappointment or promotion." In Ohio, the Republican State convention contented itself with denouncing "the violation of the civil service act by President Cleveland in those orders which extended its operation beyond its purpose and interest," and demanding "such revocation of orders or modification of the law as will accomplish its manifest purpose;" while their brethren in Pennsylvania, after denouncing President Cleveland for making an "unjust extension," declared that "the offices of the federal government have been filled with representatives of a single party," and that "the standard of efficiency has been degraded." The leading Republican newspaper of the State of Pennsylvania said editorially on the day subsequent to the adoption of this platform :

"On the civil service question the platform is lame, uninformed, self-stultifying, and heretical. Its crude language betrays a misunderstanding . . . of the true nature of the reform. . . . Running through it all is an unconcealed hostility to the essence of the reform, and in this it is at war with the National Republican platform, and with the general Republican sentiment."

The National League of Republican Clubs, after listening to an address in which its president declared that "the Republican party will take no backward steps as to the civil service reform—it has repeatedly declared in favor of it"—and that "the mere fact that a man who fills an office is a Democrat is *prima facie* evidence of the other fact that an investigation ought to be made as to his ability to fill it," adopted a platform which described the extension of the merit system by President Cleveland as "a sham, and a fraud, and a subversion of the civil service law," and favored "a modification of the rules and provisions of said law for the benefit of the public service and to remedy the gross injustice thus perpetrated."

The League of Republican State Clubs, an organization composed of residents of the various States, who, as public officials

or for other purposes, are temporarily located at the National capital, has forwarded to President McKinley a petition from which the following is an excerpt :

"Your petitioners understand that the civil service law was enacted to secure an improvement of the civil service, but during the past four years its administration has resulted in marked deterioration, loss of efficiency and economy in the service as compared with the merit system existing at the time of the passage of the law."

There has also been recently formed at Washington an organization which, though admitting citizens of all shades of political belief, has adopted the name "National Republican Anti-Civil Service League" and has for its ultimate object the repeal of the civil service law. The president of this association, in a letter written for publication, said :

"An issue has been forced upon the American people by what is known as civil service reform, and the struggle is to come between the devotees of that political contrivance and the common sense of the American people. . . . It is not of American parentage, but is the twin sister of free trade, and is not adapted to our government, for it subverts the policies established by the founders of this government, and does not consist with the genius and spirit of American institutions. It is a useless and expensive luxury."

Happily it is impossible to regard these declarations as in any way indicative of true Republican sentiment. That party is no more pledged to its policy of compensating for the extra labor cost of American manufactures by means of duties on imported goods, than to the support of the civil service law now on the statute-book, and the greatest practicable extension of its application; nor is there any reason to believe that its ablest and most trusted leaders or the mass of its voters are more heartily in favor of the former than of the latter. The President elected by that party, after it had been excluded from office for a period of four years, during which the number of places covered by the rules was doubled, has declared that "reform in the civil service must go on. . . . The best interests of the country demand this, and the people heartily approve the law."

The national platform of 1896 said :

"The civil service law was placed on the statute-book by the Republican party, which has always sustained it, and we renew our repeated declarations that it shall be thoroughly and honestly enforced and extended wherever practicable."

And, in accepting the nomination, President McKinley pro-

nounced this declaration "in keeping with the position of the party for the past twenty-four years." Among many declarations of fidelity to the reform, it is interesting to recall the rebuke which the Republican National Convention of 1888 administered to certain prominent civil service reformers. It reads :

"The men who abandoned the Republican party in 1884, and continue to adhere to the Democratic party, have deserted not only the cause of honest government, of sound finance, of freedom, of purity of the ballot, but *especially* have deserted the cause of reform in the civil service."

One who respects the history and the intelligence of the Republican party, and who believes that politics is something higher than a struggle for spoils, will not readily consent to believe that these clear and solemn utterances are overruled by the later pseudo-Republican declarations that have been quoted. The comment of the *Philadelphia Press* upon the platform adopted in Pennsylvania has been given. In commenting, editorially, at the time, on President Cleveland's orders, which made the much-debated extensions of the application of the civil service law, the *New York Tribune* said :

"If all the offices in the country, except those the occupants of which have to do with fixing policies, were taken from the domain of politics, both parties would be stronger, would more perfectly fulfil the purpose of their existence, and give the country a better government."

And subsequently :

"That final extension was neither a midnight order nor was it taken on the eve of election. It was made on May 6, 1896, and met with the general commendation of the press of both parties."

In an editorial published on July 15, 1897, the same paper said :

"The merit system will not be modified in favor of spoilsmen. . . . Their attack is on the merit system in general and their demands, though taking the form of complaint against Democrats and prayers to a Republican administration, are in reality appeals for a reversal of consistent Republican policy. . . . The extension of the merit system is a Republican policy, and spoilsmen might as well reconcile themselves to the fact. The party is hurt rather than helped by patronage. Men who cry for the correction of abuses by the substitution of new ones are entitled to no consideration. The test of merit is the only substitute which Republican principles and Republican pledges permit."

If apology for the frequent allusion to a particular party is required, it is only necessary to direct attention to the fact that the immediate, and quite possibly the ultimate, future of civil service reform rests with the party which now controls the exec-

utive branch of government, and, with a large majority in the popular branch of Congress, is able practically to dominate legislation.

Let the Philadelphia *Ledger* speak for good citizens regardless of party :

"It is useless to reason with a party worker who is 'after a job,' and impossible to convince him that party service is not the all-important qualification for the procuring of a government office, but the overwhelming majority of American citizens, who are neither office-seekers nor office-holders, whatever their partisan proclivities may be, are interested in an honest, faithful performance of duty on the part of their public servants. They are opposed to any modification of the civil service rules which will be a step backward in the direction of the spoils system, with its profligacy and its wanton waste of the public funds."

Those who are responsible for the present attack on civil service reform seek, first, to prevent further extensions of the merit system ; second, to secure the revocation of the orders by which President Cleveland added about 30,000 places to the number classified ; and, finally, to secure the actual repeal of the civil service law. Recent expressions point to a complete abandonment on their part of any hope they may have formerly entertained that the President could be induced to violate his pledges, and indicate that efforts are to be concentrated in an attempt to secure from the present Congress a modification of the law, or, failing that, to so manipulate district conventions as to secure a majority for repeal in 1898. A leader in the attack has outlined this plan of campaign with some clearness. The following is from a speech printed in the *Congressional Record* of August 11, 1897 :

"It is said that the President ought to modify and change the orders of Mr. Cleveland. It must be borne in mind in this connection that President McKinley has always favored a civil service system. . . . This system and its outrages have all been born of Congressional action. They are all based upon the statute known as the civil service enactment. . . . I for one, deeply as I feel the wrongs, will not ask the President of the United States, even though my voice might be heeded, to incur the responsibility of reversing the action of his predecessors beyond that which to his own good sense and good judgment may be commended ; but I will ask the Congress of the United States to modify this law, and I say right here, Mr. Speaker, without any menace, that this voice, this demand of the people, this shout of denunciation, has got to be recognized on this floor. . . . If this Congress fails to act the elections of 1898 will be close at hand and the people of the country will be heard from "

Evidently, then, the dangers now to be feared are : First, that

the present Congress may be induced to take some action amounting to a retrogression, or that secret manipulation of the nominating conventions may secure a majority unfavorable to the law in the Fifty-Sixth Congress. As neither of these results can be accomplished unless the honest and intelligent masses of the people can be kept in ignorance of what is taking place, the cause of good government may be somewhat served by a rapid recapitulation of the present status of the reform of the civil service, and an enumeration of some of the benefits already achieved.

The rapid expansion of the system under two Republican and two Democratic administrations previous to that of President McKinley has left little opportunity for extension except by the slow natural growth of the portions of the service already classified, and the inclusion of fourth-class postmasters and United States consuls. The inclusion of the latter must be preceded by legislation, while with regard to both postmasters and consuls there are serious practical obstacles to immediate classification.

The final extensions of the system by the executive orders of May 6, 1896, which have been the subject of recent animadversion, brought within the classified service nearly every civil position not subject to confirmation by the Senate, including those of messengers, watchmen, chiefs of division, chief clerks, and disbursing officers, and, if the rule governing removals recently promulgated be excepted, constituted the greatest advance since the enactment of the civil service law. It must be remembered also in considering the present crisis of the reform that the only proposition now advanced by its opponents that is at all likely to be successful under any circumstances is that for the revocation of these orders. Though projects for the actual repeal of the law have come forward from time to time, after substantially regular intervals ever since its passage, and will undoubtedly continue, as on the present occasion, to have a few blatant and noisy adherents, no one really anticipates their success.

There are three things which, according to the extent of its application, the merit system has accomplished for the betterment of the civil service. It has removed positions of minor importance from the sphere of partisan conflict, and, in consequence, has notably purified political methods by making it impossible to use those positions as rewards for partisan activity. Nothing short of the total abolition of the patronage system will

effectually and permanently eliminate from political contests the debasing influence of "spoils," and the return of any of the positions now included to the category of excepted places would make them immediately available for rewarding partisan zeal and activity. A second result of the merit system has been to open the door to employment in the public service to all citizens, regardless of party affiliations or personal or political services in behalf of persons holding influential positions. Equality of opportunity, "the right," as it was expressed in the Republican national platform of 1876, "of all citizens to share in the honor of rendering faithful service to the country," which was effectively denied prior to 1883 by the practical limitation of appointments to office to the friends of those composing the ascendant faction of the party in power, was accorded to every citizen so far as entrance to the civil service is concerned by the reform law of that year and the regulations promulgated by the commission which it created. Under its operation no individual, however destitute of political connections, is excluded, provided he possesses the intelligence, industry, and pluck necessary to qualify himself to become a desirable public servant. But opportunity to enter the public service is of little value to those who must be considered, from the practical standpoint of efficiency, best equipped therefor, unless it includes a possibility of growth and development therein that will enable those entering in the lowest grades to aspire, not without reasonable hope, to the positions of higher honor, responsibility and emolument.

To those who have observed at close range the methods of work in the executive departments at Washington, both prior and subsequent to the inauguration of the reform, the most apparent achievement of the merit system has been in the increased efficiency of the official machinery. This has resulted not only from the marked improvement in the qualifications of new employees, but also from the relief afforded the higher officials from the necessity they were formerly under of spending a large portion of their time in hearing appeals for office and weighing the conflicting claims of rival applicants; the possibility of organizing the clerical force with regard solely to its efficiency, and the increased incentive to industry and fidelity under a system in which advancement is made the reward of meritorious service. Under the spoils system the interference of persons having polit-

ical influence in the internal affairs of the executive departments was most common. Designations for particular duties supposed to be desirable, opportunities for travelling at public expense, extraordinary leaves of absence with compensation, and similar favors were sought by senators and representatives on behalf of their favorites, and weak-kneed officials not infrequently believed themselves under the necessity of yielding in spite of the fact that the quality of the service was seriously impaired by their complaisance. As evidence that the smallest details of office management were not considered by some of the people's representatives too insignificant to occupy their time, the writer may be allowed to mention an instance within his personal knowledge in which Congressional interference extended to the location of the desk of a subordinate in one of the offices at Washington. Only those who have engaged in the effort to secure satisfactory results in spite of such hindrances and annoyances, can realize the full extent of their injury to the public service and their cost to the taxpaying public.

The incentive to diligence in the performance of duties is in direct correspondence with the degree of confidence on the part of employees that their future in the service is dependent upon the quality of their services and the sufficiency of the rewards the industrious and capable may reasonably anticipate. The revocation of the recent extensions will remove in a large degree the strong incentive to industrious application now existing, and while it is true that the alternative, fear of immediate dismissal, can be used as a whip, the latter besides being an unkind and brutal substitute is also unsatisfactory because it produces a class of unwilling and disaffected employees.

There is a rapidly growing belief that the development of the merit system will soon make an honorable profession of the civil service, as similar methods have already done in the most enlightened countries of Europe. There are many positions the pecuniary emoluments of which are small, yet which, from the opportunities they offer for original investigation and research under most satisfactory conditions, are exceedingly attractive to young men of scientific attainments and aspirations. Not only is this true, but subordinates in these offices are receiving the very kind of training which will best fit them for holding the higher places, and the hope that they may do so in the fulness of time

is a strong inducement to earnest work and unceasing application to duty. Young men of education and ability would refuse to enter a service from the higher places of which they were arbitrarily excluded.

Competition for places in the civil service would be limited to those who were conscious of inability to excel anywhere; who had already failed in private business, or who felt the need of temporary shelter while awaiting a favorable opportunity to begin a career elsewhere. It is perfectly obvious that the most efficient and satisfactory employees cannot be drawn from any or all of these classes, and that a system which thus limits the desire to enter public service must be extravagant and costly.

H. T. NEWCOMB.